

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

The Body of Change

Putting the Head, Heart, and Hands of an Organization to Work

WHAT WE THINK

Change begins at the top. Most seasoned executives have likely been a part of several episodes of significant organizational change. Mergers, acquisitions, consolidations, and system implementations are all examples of complex and difficult tasks requiring disciplined, sophisticated leadership. But few executives have pleasant memories of these “opportunities.”

More often than not, everyone involved had hoped things would have gone better: A project that should have gone smoothly suddenly stalled; what looked neat and orderly on the flip chart felt like trench warfare during implementation. Sometimes the problems are blamed on design issues, sometimes on resistance from employees who have to make change work. But often lurking behind these excuses is a failure of leadership to cultivate change in both themselves and others.

Cultivating Change in Others

The change process is constantly modified as individuals and groups move fluidly through predictable stages of change. Although naming the stages of change is risky as it may imply that implementing change is more static, linear, and less complex than it really is, giving people a framework within which to understand the change process is worth the risk. Following are descriptions of the three general stages of change:

Stage One: Coming to Grips with the Change

In the beginning of a change process, people work to come to

grips with the need to change.

Analyzing what the current way of operating is costing the company, recognizing what really hasn't been working but has been tolerated, and envisioning how things could improve are part of this process.

Realizing that it is natural for people to differ in their attitudes and feelings about change opens the door for understanding and dialog within the company. Finding ways to link the big picture and the business case to business results and to each manager's responsibilities and take-home pay brings change closer to home.

Stage Two: Working It Through

Once a number of people in the company accept the need for change and understand both the concepts and the details of the actual change, they are still likely to face several dilemmas.

How can they do their jobs at the same time they are supposed to be learning something new? How can they coach and teach others to work differently in the new environment when they are struggling themselves? It's like trying to change a tire on a moving car. The change may start to seem like a good thing, but how can they actually accomplish it? People often

don't have time to learn how to work and manage differently because their time is consumed by inefficiencies and firefighting—the very things change is often designed to address. If you pay careful attention, however, there will be small breakthroughs that can be studied, learned from, and broadcast to the rest of the organization. These types of breakthroughs are what build momentum for the change process.

Stage Three: Maintaining Momentum

Many companies seem to have a short attention span, and people learn simply to wait for the latest management-induced change to blow over. Old behaviors resist change, and momentum for the change process can be threatened when the sponsoring executives withdraw their attention from the change initiative. If this happens, executives need to publicly recommit. The organization needs to know it has the full support of all the executives and that the implementation of the change is a continuing priority. When executives reaffirm their commitment to the change process, it sends a signal that the organization is learning to sustain its efforts and stay the course.

The Arenas of Change

Not only is change a process that unfolds over time, change has to be worked through in three overlapping human arenas: the Head, the Heart, and the Hands.

The Head: Mindset, Thinking, and Problem Solving

Often our heads get stuck in one way of seeing things. We see a situation as if it were in a mental picture frame (a context), with a top, bottom, and sides to our thinking. Our habits of thought—how we perceive something, how we interpret it, and what we see as its purpose and implications—are engrained. It is difficult for us to be aware of these filters without another person's assistance. Helping people reframe how they perceive or interpret change and its implications can melt what seems like a frozen, unworkable situation. This is accomplished by skillfully surfacing assumptions while being aware of our own truths in order to reach an understanding of what we see in common.

The Heart: Emotion and Motivation

It takes emotion to change human behavior: nothing really changes without it. Emotion, in its various guises, can either fuel or derail change. How do you know when you

are dealing with an emotional reaction to change? Sometimes the emotion is obvious in a person's expressions, voice, or actions, but sometimes it is disguised as seemingly rational arguments. Whether the emotion is expressed overtly or not, you need to look beneath the surface of whatever is happening and ask, "Why?"

People often react negatively to change, in part because they don't have opportunities to express and work through their feelings or because they don't see any payoff in it. In the past, learning mistakes may have been punished or their input not solicited, listened to, or used. Often they are told that "the bar is being raised" and are worried they can't learn the skills needed to be successful in the new environment or that they simply won't be good enough.

To help others work through their "issues of the heart," you need to begin to talk about your own experiences in ways that make it okay for people to discuss their feelings about the change. "Reality check" meetings are one forum for people to vent their feelings and to wrestle with their resistance. Reality-check meetings have two parts: In the first part, people can

vent their feelings with no holds barred and no repercussions. (“You can visit Pity City, but you don’t get to move there.”) In the second part of the meeting, people are encouraged to describe what has been going well—what has been working, how they are making it work, and what the benefits are, both for individuals and the organization. They are encouraged to express what they are learning from trying to implement and cope with change.

The Hands: Transformation Tools

So, what do you do differently on Monday? Change efforts often fizzle because vision statements, directives, and incentives for change are inadequately translated into tangible and specific actions: new ways of behaving. Transforming an organization involves dozens of new processes and changing thousands of behaviors for thousands of employees.

Often the behavior of people at every level of the organization needs to change, from very specific behaviors to broad shifts in leadership style. You will need to define new behaviors at every level and in every job. Then, people will need to see what the new behaviors and skills look like in action. Next, they will

need a forum in which to practice the new behaviors, and they will need accurate, timely feedback on how well they are doing. The coaching aspect of the roles of managers and leaders at every level is amplified. The good news is that emphasizing ways of increasing learning and skill development can make your organization more robust and ready for future changes.

The Buck Stops Here

It can be tempting to delegate change to other people in your organization or to outside consultants. Unfortunately, it won’t work. Successful organizational change requires the attention, effort, and willingness of all leaders in the organization to look at themselves and to adapt. And it starts at the top. Your willingness to learn, ask for, listen to, and incorporate feedback will set the standard and the expectations for the rest of the organization. If you are a leader involved in a change project, it is critically important to understand yourself and your approach to change. As a change agent, you need to manage yourself throughout the process in order to be an effective role model for others. There are several steps you can take:

First, it is crucial to maintain your integrity; employees will know if your confidence wavers. Be honest with yourself regarding how you feel about the changes ahead. Be reasonable with yourself; change projects are often high risk and filled with legitimate potholes, and anxiety may be an appropriate response. However, by making your concerns explicit and by developing plans to address them, you can increase everyone’s confidence.

Second, learn about and then apply the tools and techniques of the Head, Heart, and Hands to yourself before trying to use them with others. Ask questions of yourself that you might ask employees later. Typical Head questions include: How well do you (and others) understand and believe in the business reasons for the project? How well do you understand the nature of the change required? What benefits could the change bring? What might you (and others) have to give up? What will be expected of individuals and work groups? If you can’t articulate the answers to these questions for yourself, then you won’t be able to help others with their questions.

Resistance is a normal part of change—for all of us. Its genesis is in the Heart; you need to ask

yourself how you feel about the changes ahead. Every change carries with it the potential for loss and usually the potential for gain. You need to find your areas of resistance and work through your doubts. If you cannot resolve an issue, talk it over with someone who is likely to see things from a different perspective. Articulating what you might gain in the new, transformed situation is difficult because you have to imagine how things could be. But analyzing and weighing the possible gains and losses can help you find new ways of looking at the coming changes.

Even once you develop a clear understanding of the project and a growing acceptance of the implications of the change, neither you nor others are likely to know what you are supposed to do differently or how to do it.

What new knowledge and skills will everyone (including yourself) need? How should you do things differently? Here, we've entered the arena of the Hands.

Since no one is likely to know what it will look and feel like to work effectively after change implementation, you will need to develop your own picture of what good looks like. One starting point is to try to answer questions such as: What changes in leadership style will be required? and What behaviors will be part and parcel of the transformed organization?

Fundamentally, you will have to ask yourself, "What does it take to lead effectively in my current organization?" and "What will it take to lead effectively in the transformed organization?" The answer to these questions has to

come from you and your colleagues' experiences, learning, and mistakes. Once you develop a working profile for an effective leader in the new organization, you can start to work on yourself. You will be the real-life model of what it takes to learn a new way of being and working. It can be a powerful turning point in a change effort when you, as a leader, let others see how you are willing to solicit, accept, and use feedback in order to develop and change yourself.

The irony is that what started out as a project to change the organization and to change the attitudes and behaviors of others must be firmly rooted in personal change at the leadership level. It is hard to do successfully unto others until you first do unto yourself.

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